

Personal Bill
7/1/1914

Dryer 13A

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Personal

The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

William Petersen

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

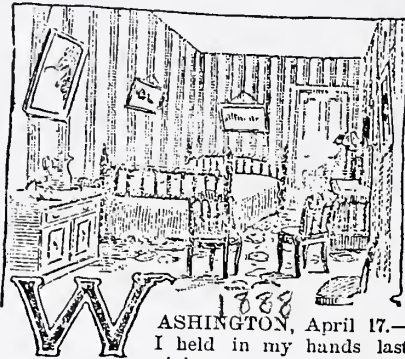
From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

LINCOLN'S DEATH BED.

Its Scenes Graphically Described by an Eye Witness.

Unpublished Incidents of Lincoln's Last Hours.

Told by the Son of the Owner of the House in Which He Died.



WASHINGTON, April 17.—

I held in my hands last night some of the most ghastly relics of the history of our country. These were two plain pillow cases, stained with blood and clotted with brains. They were yellow with age, and the crimson of the blood had faded, but the great stains had dyed nearly the whole of the pillows, and where the brains had oozed out the cloth was thick and matted. I handled also a blood stained quilt, which was originally a beautiful piece of Irish worsted work, and the colors of which, strange to say, were red, white and blue. The blood was scattered over this quilt as over the pillows, and the purple stains had discolored its beauty. I examined the stains carefully, and though I shuddered I looked again and again at the ghastly sight.

And it is worth looking at, too, for it was on these clothes that Abraham Lincoln, just twenty-three years ago last Sunday, breathed his last. These cloths of brains helped to work out the problems of the late war, and that dark blood fed the heart of the kindest president the United States has known.

A straight young man of medium height, with a pleasant face, stood by me as I looked, and, taking the clothes, showed me here and there the spots where the president had laid. This young man was the son of the owner of the house in which Lincoln died. He was a well grown fellow, now, I judge, about 40 years of age. His name is Peterson, and he was 16 years old when the assassination took place.

"On this pillow case," said he, "President Lincoln lay when he was first brought in, but it soon became saturated with blood, and Secretary Stanton asked me for another. I brought him this" (taking up the second), "and on this he died."

"The scenes are fresh now as if they had happened but yesterday. I was at home for my Easter vacation, and my father lived in the brick house just opposite Ford's theatre. This theatre was then the leading one of Washington, and a box was always reserved for Lincoln. I was well acquainted with the theatre people, and I knew the ins and outs well. Lincoln attended the theatre often, and he was surprised one time to see young Tad on the stage, dressed up to represent one of the minor characters. He did not know him at first, but his actions seemed strangely familiar, and when he saw who it was he burst into a roar which called the attention of the house to his box.

"I knew Wilkes Booth very well, and he sometimes slept at our house. He was a tall, well made young fellow, and he had large black eyes and luxuriant black hair. He was a nervous, erratic, strange man; and it is a curious thing that he slept in our house a week before this deed was done, and under this same coverlid upon which Lincoln died.

"The assassination, you know, occurred on the night of the 14th of April, and I saw

more down Pennsylvania avenue. It was not far off from Willard's hotel that I saw him, and I was then on my way to play ball on the grounds just below the White House. When the game was over I went home and had supper. After supper I went to the theatre, but I did not go to Ford's, as I had often seen the "American Cousin," but I went to another theatre, where "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp" was being played. As I started out to go to the theatre I saw the president's carriage drive up to Ford's, and President Lincoln and some other gentlemen and ladies got out. After I had been at the theatre but a short time the manager came to the front of the stage and said that the performance had to stop, as the president had been shot at Ford's. The crowd made a rush for the doors, and I tried to go home. As I reached the corner of Tenth and E streets, a block away from the theatre, I heard some men gathered around a fellow whom they had caught hold of, and yelling: "Hang him! hang him!" They were standing under a sycamore tree, and one of them suggested that it was a good place to string him up. The wretch was a poor fellow who had nothing to do with the assassination, but whom they suspected. I pushed my way past these men, and finally got to the door of my father's house. Two soldiers were in front of it. I tried to pass them, but they said: "You can't go in. The president is lying in there."

"But I live here," I replied.

"That makes no difference, you can't go in," returned the soldiers.

"I will see if I can't get in!" I muttered to myself as I slipped around to a shutter which I knew could be opened, and climbed into the window. The first man I met was my father, and he told me the president was lying in the room the actor Matthews had formerly occupied, and that he wanted me to help him. My sister was at school at Bethlehem, Pa., and my mother was there with her. So I was practically alone with my father.

"Did Lincoln die in the room into which he was first carried?"

"Yes, but this room has not been well represented in the pictures of the scene. It was a small narrow room in the rear of the house and just at the end of the entrance hall. It was about ten feet wide and fifteen feet long. It was very plainly furnished, and the walls were covered with brown and white stripes. A paper running up and down from the floor to the ceiling. Some engravings and photographs were hanging on the wall" (here Mr. Peterson pointed to some cheap pictures upon the walls of his room where we were sitting), "and these pictures were among them. The furniture of the room was very simple. There was merely a bureau, a little black walnut bedstead and a few chairs.

"When I came in the president was lying on the bed. His face looked ghastly, and the blood was still flowing from his wound upon the pillows. The blood flowed fast and the pillows were saturated. A number of the cabinet, including Edwin Stanton, Salmon P. Chase, Secretary Wells and others, stood beside the bed, and several doctors were present. Charles Sumner sat on the bed holding the president's hand, and sobbed like a child. There were tears in the eyes of nearly every man present, and now and then

they tried to speak with the president. But he was unconscious. He lay with his head on this pillow, and his eyes, all blood shot, almost protruded from their sockets. His face twitched, and it looked as though he was trying to speak, but I suppose the action of his features was involuntary."

"Was Mrs. Lincoln present?" I asked.

"No, at this time she was in an adjoining room, and Robert was there trying to comfort her. She was sobbing and crying, and during that night she came now and then to the bed and burst into a flood of tears, and then went away, sobbing, into the other room. The doctors wanted some hot water and bottles and asked me to get them for them. We had a hot fire in the kitchen, and I had the cook put the hot water in the bottles and bring them in. The doctors then placed them about the body of the president, rubbing his limbs all the time to keep the blood

the foot of the bed, rubbing his right leg. At this time all hope had not been given up, but as the night wore on the prospects became very gloomy, and the scene comes before me to-night.

"Between 3 and 4 o'clock I got very sleepy, and was sitting on a trunk at the foot of the bed and nodding. Secretary Wells touched me and said: 'My boy, you are tired out, and you had better go out and get some sleep, and we will call you if we need you.' At this I went into the next room and sat down upon a rocking chair. I was soon sound asleep, but in a moment a rough hand caught my shoulder, and Secretary Stanton's voice said: 'My boy, this is no time to sleep, and you had better go in and watch.' I then returned to my place, but I could not keep my eyes open, and I finally went into the back room and slept till dawn. It was just light when I returned to the death chamber. President Lincoln was breathing so heavily that you could have heard him in any part of the house. His face was death like, and his jaw had fallen down upon his breast, showing his teeth. So he remained until 7:23, when he died.

"I have never seen a correct painting of the death bed. A lot of cheap things were thrown upon the country at the time, but they were not in accordance with the facts. Mrs. Lincoln is painted in these pictures as kneeling at the bedside and holding her husband's hand as the life went out of his body. She was, in fact, not in the room. The cabinet were, however, all present, and all were weeping. Charles Sumner and Robert Lincoln stood together, and Sumner's arm was thrown around young Robert's shoulders. Sumner was crying, and young Lincoln was sobbing.

"I then left the house and went to tell my father, who was at his store. It was a nasty day. As I opened the door I saw that it was drizzling, cloudy and dark. There was a guard around the house, and also one stationed on each of the corners, above and below. I gave the first announcement of the death to them and through them to the outside world. I got father, and when I came back the president was all black about the eye and forehead. I put my hand on his face, and it was as cold as a stone.

"Soon after this Mr. Lincoln was taken from the house. His body was wrapped up in a couple of blankets and carried to the embalmer's. It was then laid out in state in the East Room of the White House."

"You do not own the house in which President Lincoln died, Mr. Peterson?"

"No; all is changed now, and these relics which I have are the last practical evidences of the president's last sufferings. The room in which he died has been changed, and we have sold the house to its present owner, Mr. Louis Shade. We got \$4,500 for it. The buyer took it because he thought the government would use it as a museum, and he asked, some time ago, \$12,000 for it. These pictures and these pillow cases are all that is left of the furniture. We sold the bed upon which the president died for \$80, and I think it is now in Syracuse, N. Y. No one has ever slept under this coverlid since that night, and we would not think of using it. I do not think it should be sold to any one. It should be preserved for a museum. We could have sold it time and again.

"It is wonderful the desire people have for collecting relics of Lincoln. They came for days after the president's death to see the room in which he died, and they stole everything they could get their hands on. They snipped pieces out of the curtains, pulled paper off of the walls, and even carried away the mustard plasters we used that night. When the president was carried over from the theatre to the house that night, some drops of his blood fell upon our doorstep, and the next day men and boys dipped little pieces of paper into this blood, and carried them away as mementoes.

"The day after the assassination was Sunday, and Washington was draped in black, and all the preachers preached funeral sermons over him.

"I don't like to think of it," concluded Mr. Peterson, as he folded up the blood stained pillow cases and quilt. "The scenes of it

"Sometimes haunts me like a nightmare, and I almost wish that I had not been a part of them." THOMAS J. TODD.

Abraham Lincoln died in the bed of Miss Louise Petersen of Washington, who was away at school at the time of the assassination. The stricken President was carried to the Petersen home, across from Ford's theater. Miss Petersen, grown, became the wife of Charles Rector, and the mother of George Rector, famous restaurateur of New York's period of gustatory glory. Mr. Rector and his sister, Mrs. D.

S. Fraser of Chicago, still own the pillow on which the martyred President's head rested. The case is marked by a large dark stain. It is at present on loan to a museum in Chicago.

12/28/38 *Kan City Times*

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor,
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 523

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

April 17, 1939

THE PETERSEN HOUSE

The house standing at 516, formerly numbered 453, Tenth Street Northwest in Washington has become one of the nation's most impressive shrines. Here Abraham Lincoln passed away in a room smaller than the cabin room in which he was born.

Immediately after the President was shot by the assassin Booth at Ford's Theatre on the night of April 14, 1865, Dr. Charles Taft examined the prostrate body of Lincoln and ordered it removed to the nearest bed. Dr. Taft states that in directing those carrying the body he observed upon reaching the street a man standing on the porch of a house just opposite the theatre. "To that house I directed my steps," he said, "and was pleased to find a neat bedroom at the end of the hall, without going upstairs. The single bed was pulled out from the corner of the room and the dying President laid upon it diagonally, his extreme length not admitting any other position."

The house to which the body of the unconscious Lincoln was taken was occupied by the family of Mr. W. Petersen, and the dwelling has since become known as the Petersen House. The building, a three-story brick with a "light" basement which virtually made it a four-story building, was under construction when Abraham Lincoln was in Congress in 1849.

Mr. Petersen evidently became offended because his home had been called a tenement house by some of the news reporters, and he had this impression corrected by Leslie's weekly which commended, "Mr. Petersen's house in which the President died is one of the most respectable houses in Washington and not a tenement house . . . It is one of the highest of its class."

There were several roomers in the house, however, and the room where the body of the President was taken was rented by William T. Clark. Four other men were inmates of the home as indicated by this interesting excerpt from Leslie's paper of April 29, 1865:

"Artistic Accuracy

"We present to our readers below conclusive and unsolicited evidence of the accuracy of our engraving of the scene at the deathbed of President Lincoln:

Washington, D. C., 453 10th Street,
Sunday, April 16, 1865.

"We, the undersigned, inmates of No. 453 10th street, Washington, D. C., the house in which President Abraham Lincoln died, and being present at the time of his death, do hereby certify that the sketches taken by Mr. Albert Berghaus, Artist for *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, are correct.

HENRY ULKE,
JULIUS ULKE,
W. PETERSEN,

THOS. PROCTOR,
WM. T. CLARK,
H. S. SAFFORD."

To the artist Berghaus we are indebted for a minute description of the death chamber:

"The room in which the President died is in the rear part of the building, and at the end of the main hall, from which rises a stairway. The walls are covered with a brownish paper, figured with a white design. Its dimen-

sions are about ten by fifteen feet. Some engravings and a photograph hang upon the walls. The engravings were copies of the 'Village Blacksmith,' and Herring's 'Stable and Barnyard Scenes.' The photograph was one taken from an engraved copy of Rosa Bonheur's 'Horse Fair.' The only furniture in the room was a bureau covered with crochet, a table, eight or nine plain chairs, and the bed upon which Mr. Lincoln lay when his spirit took its flight. The bedstead was a low walnut, with headboard from two to three feet high. The floor was carpeted with Brussels, considerably worn. Everything on the bed was stained with the blood of the Chief Magistrate of the nation."

One wonders why a much larger bedroom just in back of the parlor was not used in preference to the hall bedroom as it contained a bed, but Dr. Taft's comment and a citation by Mr. Oldroyd may answer the question. Apparently the bed in the large room was not made up, while Dr. Taft refers to Clark's room as "a neat bedroom."

A letter which William Clark wrote to his sister Ida four days after the assassination has been preserved and reveals some interesting side lights on this last host to the martyred President:

"Dear Sister Ida:

"Today the funeral of Mr. Lincoln takes place . . . Hundreds daily call at the house to gain admission to my room. I was engaged nearly all Sunday with one of Frank Leslie's special artists, aiding him in making a complete drawing of the last moments of Mr. Lincoln, as I know the position of everyone present. He succeeded in executing a fine sketch, which will appear in their paper. He wished to mention the names of all pictures in the room, particularly the photograph of yourself, Clara, and Nannie; but I told him he must not do that, as they were members of my family, and I did not wish them to be made so public. He also urged me to give him my picture, or at least allow him to take my sketch, but I could not see that either. Everybody has a great desire to obtain some memento from my room, so that whoever comes in has to be closely watched for fear they will steal something. I have a lock of Mr. Lincoln's hair, which I have had neatly framed; also a piece of linen with a portion of his brain. The pillow and case upon which he lay when he died, and nearly all his wearing apparel, I intend to send to Robert Lincoln as soon as the funeral is over as I consider him the most justly entitled to them. The same mattress is on my bed, and the

same coverlid covers me nightly that covered him while dying . . .

"Your affec. brother,
"Willie."

Sixteen years later the house was in possession of Louis Schade, and the room in which Lincoln died became the playroom for Mr. Schade's children. The memorial association of the District of Columbia leased the house and it was opened as a museum on October 17, 1893. It is now the property of the government and its restoration has been directed so as to create the surroundings as they appeared on the night of Lincoln's death.

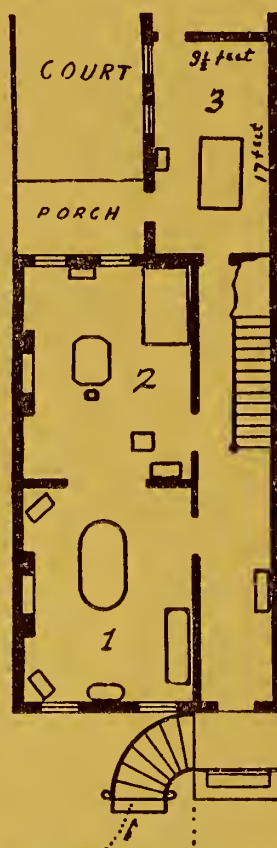


DIAGRAM OF THAT PART OF
HOUSE UTILIZED ON FATAL
NIGHT.

1. Front parlor occupied by Mrs. Lincoln.
2. Back parlor occupied by Secretary Stanton for the preliminary examination of witnesses.
3. Hall bedroom in which the President died.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION



National Archives and Records Service

Washington, D.C. 20408

August 24, 1964

IN REPLY REFER TO:

Mr. Ralph Borreson
Sheldon Community Schools
Sheldon, Iowa

Dear Mr. Borreson:

Concerning an error in publication of a caption for a picture obtained from the National Archives and appearing in J. McLaughlin's Gettysburg: Long Encampment, Appleton-Century, 1963, I suggest that you write to either the author or the publisher and enquire for the reason for identifying the picture as a Washington scene, dated April 21, 1865. The information on the picture in our files is briefly "Lincoln's Funeral Procession" not specifying the place, the date, or the photographer. As you know, there is no way to prevent users of pictures from altering captions to serve their own needs, though we assume that they strive for accuracy in their illustrations as in their texts. To the limited extent possible, we also strive to furnish accurate information to the users of the pictures in our custody.

The spelling of the name of the owner of the house at 453 Tenth Street in 1865 is given officially as Petersen with an "e". This determination was made by the National Park Service and is based on the spelling given in the Census records of 1860 and in the City Directories, 1861-65. Earlier, Mr. Petersen signed his name with an "o", which appears first on an immigration record of his entry into this country in the 1850's. His descendants, however, have used the "e" consistently, and the name is so spelled in the current publication on the House Where Lincoln Died, distributed by the National Park Service. A copy of this publication is enclosed.

Sincerely yours,

Josephine Cobb
Specialist in Iconography

Enclosure

SHELDON COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

R A L P H B O R R E S O N • S U P E R I N T E N D E N T • S H E L D O N I O W A

September 2, 1964

Dr. Gerald McMurtry
Lincoln National Life Foundation
Fort Wayne, Indiana

Dear Dr. McMurtry:

Thank you for your kind words in your letter of a few weeks ago. When I wrote you about the Petersen spelling, I had also requested Miss Cobb's opinion. She always comes up with something helpful. Thought you might like to know too.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ralph Borreson". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Ralph Borreson

RB/mf

September 9, 1964

Mr. Ralph Borreson
Superintendent
Sheldon Community Schools
Sheldon, Iowa

Dear Mr. Borreson:

I was pleased to have your note of September 2nd along with the Xerox copy of the letter from Miss Josephine Cobb.

The information which she has provided regarding the spelling of the name Petersen is important and this correspondence shall be placed in our files.

Yours sincerely,

R. Gerald McMurtry

RGM/hcs

W. EMERSON RECK

61 Hedgely Road, Springfield, Ohio 45506

*file
no reply
necessary*

April 21, 1980

Dr. Mark E. Neely, Jr.
Director
The Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library
and Museum
1300 South Clinton Street
Fort Wayne, Indiana

Dear Mark:

Thanks for your letter which came while we were in Washington, trying to clear up a few more questions about that "last day." I wish it were possible to get there information as easily as it is from you and your staff. We wasted one day at the National Archives because: 1) the man with whom I had been working for several years had just left for another job; 2) the person taking his place had that particular day off; 3) the next person seen sent the wrong materials to the reference desk; 4) when the wrong material did arrive it was for Peck instead of Reck and it took me two hours to receive it.

We were treated fine at Ford's Theatre where I wanted to see the Bersch painting, "Borne by Loving Hands." They even got it out of storage so we could see it. The Petersen House is still closed and has been for three years.

I checked the City Directories in Washington because I wanted to know how Petersen spelled his name inasmuch as about as many authors have spelled it Peterson as Petersen. The Directories before 1865 spell it Petersen, those after 1865 for several years spell it Peterson, and then it went back to Petersen!

I did learn that the First National Bank of Washington had gone into receivership by 1874 with E. L. Stanton as receiver. Through the Philadelphia Society of Pennsylvania I have learned that there was a Western Bank in Philadelphia in 1865 but by 1914 it, too, was in liquidation.

I had Basler's Collected Works and have found the set invaluable in this job. By the way, I have about twenty references to General Van Alen now, including his letters to Lincoln from the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection. This material will provide an appendix.

Sincerely,

Emerson

Abraham Lincoln's death house yields 19th Century relics

By ROBERT M. ANDREWS
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — As tourists and schoolchildren troop through the house where Abraham Lincoln died, archaeologists are excitedly digging up the basement for long-buried trash that may yield valuable clues about how ordinary city dwellers lived in Lincoln's day.

The rare urban excavation is taking place at the Petersen House, a national historical site that stands in the shadows of steel-and-glass office buildings in downtown Washington.

The archaeologists are working directly beneath the first-floor bedroom where then-President Lincoln died on April 15, 1865, the morning after he was fatally shot by actor John Wilkes Booth while attending a play across the street at Ford's Theater.

The search, which began in late January, has uncovered more than 5,000 well-preserved articles of trash buried in layers for as long as 135 years under the rotting floorboards of the basement.

"Except for the tragic events that plunged this home into the pages of history, these artifacts might have been lost forever, destroyed along with the rest of the neighborhood to make room for new construction," said Dr. Stephen R. Potter, chief National Park Service archaeologist for the national capital region.

"As it is, we've found ... neat little time capsules buried in the basement which could tell us a lot about the lives of ordinary Americans of the mid-19th century," Potter said.

The refuse includes fragments of ceramic dishes, jugs and vases, tiny wine goblets, perfume bottles and medicine jars, machine-cut nails, shoes, painted horsehair-covered plaster, mica sheets possibly used for window panes, children's ceramic marbles and broken pencil stubs, a bone domino, tobacco pipe bowls and stems, straight pins, needles and buttons, and a lady's haircomb.

There also are the remains of meals served in the Petersen boarding house — bones of cows, pigs, chickens and turkeys, some still bearing the marks of a butcher's knife.

Three or four damaged glass microscope slides have been traced

through other documents to Julius and Henry Ulke, two amateur entomologists who worked at the Smithsonian Institution and were boarders at the Petersen House when Lincoln died there.

The refuse was tossed casually into the backyard by the family of William Petersen, an immigrant German tailor and father of seven children, who built the house in 1850 and took in boarders to supplement his modest income.

Everywhere You Look: German-American Sites in Washington, DC

Petersen House / The House Where Lincoln Died



Photo Gallery

William A. and Anna Petersen lived across the street from Ford's Theater in a plain red brick three-story and basement townhouse that Petersen constructed in 1849. William Petersen was a German immigrant tailor born in Hanover in 1810. His wife, Anna, was from Darmstadt. Petersen had a tailor shop on Pennsylvania Avenue, but like many home-owners in 19th-century Washington, the Petersens let out rooms to transients and new immigrants.

The house at 516 Tenth Street NW is remembered today as the House Where Lincoln Died, but it has additional links to German-American history: Julius Ulke, a German-American photographer, boarded there in the 1860's and took the historic photograph showing the room a few minutes after President Lincoln's body was removed from the bedroom where he died at 7:22 am on April 15, 1865.

In 1878, a native Berliner, Louis Schade (1829-1903), another prominent "Forty-Eighter" who came to the United States in 1851, purchased the house at 516 Tenth Street NW from the Petersens' heirs. He published *The Washington Sentinel* from his home. Louis Schade sold the house to the federal government in 1896.

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[Heinrich and Julius Ulke, photographers, scientists, artists](#)  

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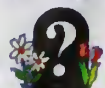
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William Petersen

Memorial Photos Flowers

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Birth: Jun. 16, 1810
 Death: Jun. 18, 1871

Civil War Figure. Owned the house across the street from Fords Theatre in Washington, DC. President Abraham Lincoln was brought to his house after being shot by John Wilkes Booth, and died there. Petersen committed suicide on the Washington DC Mall in front of the Smithsonian Institution. Mr. Petersen's house is now a National Historic Landmark, visited by thousands each year.

Family Links:
 Spouse:
 Anna Petersen (1819 - 1871)*

*Calculated relationship

Cause of death: Possible suicide by Laudanum

[Search Amazon for Willllam Petersen](#)

Burial:
[Prospect Hill Cemetery](#)
 Washington
 District of Columbia
 District Of Columbia, USA

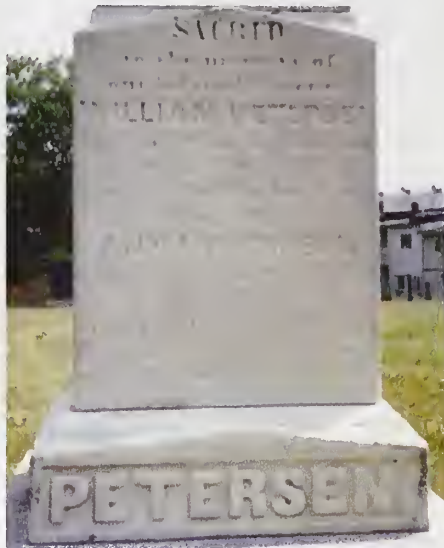
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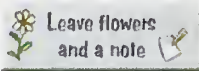
- LINDA /the night nurse
Added: Jun. 18, 2012



I light a candle for William Petersen ...
- Candles
Added: Jan. 21, 2012



- Sharon
Added: Jun. 16, 2011



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